Beyond the Classroom

Connor Flick (00:03):

Out-of-school-time, sometimes called OST, programs—such as after-school, summer, and other extracurricular programs—offer spaces for young people to develop interests, skills, and social connections beyond the classroom. Despite years of research on the benefits of OST programs, recent studies have shown that many young people from lower-income families do not have the same access to programs as young people from higher-income families. To explore these barriers to participation in programs and the experiences of young people who participate in them, The Wallace Foundation commissioned a student-designed study consisting of focus groups and a survey to help surface young people's reflections on and hopes for the sector. The research team was made up of 12 high school and college students from New York, Colorado, and Kentucky and was advised by four university researchers. You can read the findings in a brief on Wallace's website at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Connor Flick (00:54):

The brief is called "Youth Perspectives on Designing Equitable Out-of-School-Time Programs." Members of the research team who contributed to the brief are here today to discuss their work. This is the second episode in a three-part podcast that will deal with programs and practices that foster dignity and belonging. The first episode focuses on redefining the OST world and mapping access. And the third episode focuses on professionalization and precarity of the OST workforce. I'm Connor Flick, a senior at Gatton Academy High School and member of the Kentucky Student Voice Team who worked on the study. I'm also the host for today's episode. I'll let my colleagues introduce themselves. Spandana?

Spandana Pavuluri ([01:30](#)):

Hi, my name is Spandana Pavuluri. I'm a junior at DuPont Manual High School and I've also been a part of the Kentucky Student Voice Team for almost two years now. And I also got the pleasure of working on this wonderful study.

Connor Flick ([01:43](#)):

Amazing. Syeda?

Syeda Tabassum ([01:45](#)):

Hi everyone. My name is Syeda Tabassum. I'm a junior at the Macaulay Honors College and I was also a part of the YPAR team and got to work with Spandana and Connor on this project.

Connor Flick ([01:55](#)):

Thank you. Daniela?

Daniela DiGiacomo ([01:57](#)):

Yeah. Hi, I'm Daniela DiGiacomo and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky in the School of Information Science in the College of Communication and Information. And I am one of the adult researchers on the team.

Connor Flick ([02:09](#)):

And last but certainly not least, Sam.

Sam Mejias ([02:12](#)):

Hi, I'm Sam Mejias. I'm an associate professor at Parsons School of Design in New York City. And I'm another one of the adult researchers on the project. Happy to be here.

Connor Flick (02:21):

Wonderful. Thank you all for joining me today. Let's dive in. The research shows that an inclusive environment is an important factor in a young person's decision to participate and stay in an OST program, even more so than the activities or learning opportunities that the program actually offers. Syeda, what makes a program welcoming and inclusive?

Syeda Tabassum (02:40):

Yeah, I think this is a great first question. I think one of the most important things that we found in our research is that the youth, they really care about their voices being heard and then having leadership roles as part of their organizations they're a part of. They want their voices to be heard in a way that affects decision making within the organization. And another thing is this idea of having a community, which isn't just because you're in a program that you're sharing interests with all of the participants. You're doing things that you all like to do, right? You have shared interest, but you're also building the quality time. To have an inclusive experience is not just doing the work, but also having trips together, or going to dinner, or building community in that way. Another thing is also feeling like people are seen, so their identities aren't ostracized or marginalized within the groups. Because you know, there can be minority groups within these programs, but they need to also feel included as well. And so teaching people how to interact with the different cultures, the leaders of the organizations, how to have these intercultural experiences and making nobody feel left out in that way.

Spandana Pavuluri (04:06):

I think you covered a ton of what we talked about and, you know, Syeda and I got to work on this question together about how have the OST programs you've been a part of provided you with a sense of community. And so the overwhelming and most frequent response was safety, acceptance, and belonging, which makes complete sense. We had even a quote about a student who was part of the

LGBTQ+ community and just being able to know that they were being respected and accepted in their program was really huge for them because it's such a major part of their identity. And then our next really major finding or code that we were coding among all our different responses for this open response question was relationships. So just being able to make that connection with people—to not just work professionally with people but also be able to call them a friend—was super important.

Spandana Pavuluri ([05:04](#)):

And I think what makes a program welcoming and inclusive and even gives it the opportunity to be, is probably not constantly having a predetermined and specifically adult-made agenda. So, it's super important that when creating a plan for an OST or an idea of what you want to do that day, you're making sure to give some time for maybe a quick icebreaker. Or even more than that, giving time for people to genuinely talk to each other and have fun and really chill with each other just so that they can become more comfortable with each other. So yeah, this is definitely a really, really important question and something that we overwhelmingly saw as the necessity for students and OSTs. They really want this, they prioritize it, and it's what makes an OST really strong and will probably motivate and mobilize its members to do even more because they feel that they're heard in their community, and that they have friends who will listen to them, and they have a caring and supportive environment.

Connor Flick ([06:07](#)):

All right, continuing from that point, alternatively, Sam, what might make a program feel exclusive or unwelcoming to the point where one might not join or stay as participant?

Sam Mejias ([06:16](#)):

Yeah, Connor, thanks for the question. One of the key findings from the study we did was that 45% of respondents said that they had sometimes been treated differently than others in OST programs

because of their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, or religion. And actually nearly two-thirds of our Black respondents said they sometimes had been treated differently. So obviously the way someone is treated in that space can have a huge impact on their ability to feel like they're welcomed and included. Another thing to think about—so I've, you know, I have a background also in having worked to run after-school programs. And one of the things that you notice is that there can sometimes be, depending on the context, a lack of attention and care to the afterschool environment. And that can make it very often feel like an unstructured place where there's little intentionality like there is during the school day.

Sam Mejias (07:02):

That looseness can be a good thing, but it can also discourage people from participating, especially if it manifests in ways that sort of create or generate environments where certain groups might dominate or other differences are treated as problematic. So that's definitely one thing we saw that can be a factor on whether somebody feels like a space is particularly welcoming for them, an OST space. I also want to echo Syeda and Spandana's points about making meaningful connections with adult facilitators within OST spaces. Because without this, those spaces can really sometimes feel alienating if you're not able to make those kinds of connections.

Spandana Pavuluri (07:36):

I can build on that a little bit and completely echo everything you said, Sam. We just talked, you know, I'm looking at this question right now that was like, "What have they done that makes you feel like there is not a sense of community?" And so like Sam was talking about things like exclusiveness, discrimination, lack of communication, and really just to talk about this lack of communication point— it's like when you're barely getting messages or when you have no external way to communicate, when you don't really know what's going on in the OST and with other people, then it makes it very difficult to

feel very involved and integrated into the community and into the OST itself. I just have a couple of quotes here that I can read of some student responses talking about when they didn't feel included.

Spandana Pavuluri (08:27):

The first quote is, "Everyone judging or not including you." Which I think any student can explain why that—or any person in general—can explain why that would be very ostracizing and probably very daunting as well. And then another student said, "Taunting me because of my race," which is obviously very heartbreaking and can make a student feel very, very excluded within a group. And then another quote we have here says, "Sometimes a group becomes so big or the program doesn't allow enough time to interact with other participants, so you never really connect with anyone in the group." And you know that, I think that goes back to our previous question of what is important to make a space welcoming and inclusive. And it's, you have to carve out that time for relationships and for connection. And we so often push it to the side because we think, oh, this isn't one of our goals. This isn't exactly what we're working towards. But the group will function 10 times better when you have people who feel connected with each other.

Connor Flick (09:32):

I kind of want to pull on some of Sam's thinking with that question a little bit and direct something towards Daniela. And I really want to ask, Daniela, what can be done to develop and sustain some antiracist people and practices at OST programs to make sure that everyone feels welcomed and valued? Trying to step away from the findings that Sam is bringing forth about how OST programs can actively sometimes be racist and that they do have differences based on gender ID and, most importantly, race.

Daniela DiGiacomo (10:00):

Yeah, thanks Connor. I mean, I think this is perhaps one of the most central and pressing questions right now because of what we know both from the research and practice about how important youth workers—so, these are the adults in these after-school and out-of-school-time settings, how important youth workers are to the success and sustainability of out-of-school-time programs. And I would say in terms of what can be done to develop and sustain antiracist people and practices in these spaces, it's really about working at every possible interactional and institutional moment to, I think to decenter whiteness. Which is no small task, considering the pervasiveness of whiteness and its association with what counts as good learning or acceptable behavior in out-of-school-time settings. In addition, we need to think about what that means in terms of training and recruiting program leaders and staff to be well-versed on topics that are culturally relevant and otherwise relevant to students.

Daniela DiGiacomo ([11:05](#)):

We need to train program leaders and staff on how to create youth-led spaces that are characterized by youth–adult partnerships. As was mentioned earlier, it's really important to make sure that young people are part of the constitution and design of these out-of-school-time programs. So, unsurprisingly, like adults, young people feel more invested and committed to the program if they're a part of its design. And so inviting young people to work alongside program staff to make decisions about the out-of-school-time program content and practices, this is really important, right? So, they're not only a part of the design of the space and activities, but also the ethos and the culture. I also think it's about preparing youth workers to understand their professional roles as mentors and coaches and supportive partners rather than as top-down managers or hands-off chaperones.

Daniela DiGiacomo ([12:00](#)):

And again, thinking explicitly around how we can be and become antiracist in our practices and in our interactions: This is an ongoing project. It's not something that's just accomplished at one point. These

are things that we can constantly work on and through. And it's about shifting our own language and behavior as youth workers and youth worker trainers in these settings to explicitly counter and work against deficit-based and racist narratives about youth of color and what they are capable of and can do in any sort of educational or learning setting. I think there's some longstanding narratives about the purpose of out-of-school-time programs, especially for youth from minoritized communities. We can look back to a lot of the research from Robert Halpern and Sue Acquan, who talk about how these programs have often been meant to sort of keep or contain at-risk youth. And we know that that's not what they are and not what they should be. These are spaces where all young people deserve the time and the space to flourish in out-of-school learning settings. And so really considering how we think about their role in the broader sort of project youth development is really important. Thank you, Connor, for that question.

Sam Mejias ([13:28](#)):

Yeah, if I can just chime in. I completely agree with this. I think the wider questions about how do we shift the culture of OST spaces to prioritize these sort of strategic lenses into how you can actually get young people to be more meaningfully involved, to feel a sense of belonging and also to feel a sense of dignity in the space, that, again, transcends histories of categorizing OST spaces as deficit-based spaces and as spaces for only particular groups. So, I think that's a really important point to make. It's a big challenge as well. How do we start to think about looking at these spaces in that holistic way where it's not just how do we make the programs better or think about professional development for youth workers, but really bring an antiracist lens across all of it.

Connor Flick ([14:17](#)):

All right, thank you both. I want to pull from some of that a little bit and point out that we've talked a lot about what OST programs could be doing better. What are some best practices, and how can we move

forward to make sure that OST spaces are a more welcoming and inclusive environment? And I want to ask Spandana specifically, if you could design your dream OST program beyond just what the content of the program is—so whether it's sports, arts, just whatever you like to do—what would that look like? What would the culture of that program look like for you?

Spandana Pavuluri ([14:48](#)):

Yeah, so I love this question. I think it's very, very exciting to think about what the possibilities are and there's definitely programs out there that really do try their best to fulfill a lot of what I'm going be talking about. But first it's just that social acceptance, feeling that inclusivity. And something that I really think makes me feel valued in a space is when someone remembers and values my presence and I can feel them doing that. You know, it's the difference between noticing someone who wasn't there that day and checking up on them, something like that. Really small things like that go a long, long way. And then I think it's really important that we're in OSTs because they do fuel our passions.

Spandana Pavuluri ([15:39](#)):

A lot of the time these are things that we really care about, these are the things we want to advocate for, these are the sports we love to play, something like that. And so I think really understanding and prioritizing whatever students are passionate in. So, I'll give a quick example really quick. So, I was in this program called Global Citizenship Program and on the first day we went, they just asked us, they were like, "What do you want to talk about? What are you interested in? What world issues do you want to talk about and do you want to focus on and do you want to research?" And, you know, it shouldn't be radical to have a moment like that, but it was, because a lot of times you're not really asked that. And a lot of times you just go into a space and everything's determined, everything's already written up, all the handouts are already made, and there's no room for flexibility or for change.

Spandana Pavuluri ([16:31](#)):

And so, I think that's something that's very important, just making time for students to be able to talk about what they care about, what they're interested in. And then something I really do want to hit on is accessibility. I do recognize that I'm lucky enough to have been privileged in terms of, I could get the books I needed, I could get transportation to school or an after-school program anytime I needed. And I have technology that I can always rely on. And obviously not every student has this. And so, I think there's kind of this issue with OST spaces in that they often tend to cater to a more privileged group just because it's easier to access these people. However, there's a lot of students where there would be so many barriers that would get in the way of that student even being able to attend.

Spandana Pavuluri ([17:27](#)):

And that's not even attending frequently. There's no excuse for not taking that extra step to make things more accessible. It's really, really important that you're giving a diverse representation. And so, then, that's my next little point of diversity would be something that, it's something that I constantly value. There's just so much you can learn about another person just from a single other person. But an OST of all different backgrounds and ethnicities and races, things like that. It just, it teaches you so much more. You're able to become so much more culturally aware and just kind of become a global citizen, honestly. So, making sure that you're really representing all different backgrounds is huge.

Syeda Tabassum ([18:11](#)):

Our time as YPAR researchers, being in this YPAR research group, has kind of been an example of what a good OST would be like. I think we've kind of built these relationships with the mentors and the people who are here, and they've sustained themselves over time. You know, we started this research, I think it was in October of last year or something, maybe longer, I'm not sure, but now we're here doing this

podcast though. I think having those relationships that you can check in after a while and then still feel like you still know these people and they still care about you. I think that's really important.

Sam Mejias (18:51):

Well, that's really nice to hear. Thanks, Syeda. We feel the same. I mean, part of the excitement for me about being part of this project is that I get to just take a back seat and watch you guys just do amazing work and it's an absolute joy. So, it's been great to sort of be able to hear you say that this models the kind of experience that you'd wanna see in an OST setting. I think also, I'm curious actually to hear what you all think about how your participation in this project has helped you think a little bit differently about OST spaces. Obviously, you've generated all this, this amazing insight from the research that you've done with other young people, with peers, but I'm curious about how it might have shifted your thinking about the possibilities of OST.

Connor Flick (19:39):

I'll jump in here really fast. I understand [as] the host, I'm supposed to be a bit of a neutral party, but I can't help but answer your question, Sam, because this work really has shifted all on my thinking and it has really changed how I understand OST spaces to where my own research outside of this group and outside of this podcast focuses a lot on equity. I focus a lot on the pandemic and on race in the classroom and how we understand kind of the school climate of our classrooms. And the social dynamics and what goes into that, and how we can create kind of that culture of care and empathy that I think Spandana was really talking about in terms of OST spaces really trying to take that culture and put it into the classroom. And one thing that I'm just constantly thinking about with this project is just what's possible and what should be expected of OST programs to really say that they're equitable and to really say that they're effective.

Connor Flick ([20:33](#)):

And Spandana said this really beautifully, to where if you're a group that's advocating for a certain population, if you're a group that's targeting a certain population, you should be doing everything in your power to recruit them and to engage them and to fold them not only into the programming that you have, but also the leadership as well. And that sort of stance of shifting away from just students as people who participate in—young people as people who participate in OST—but more so young people as leaders of OST. And young people as partners in OST of creating spaces that are quality and equitable and meaningful for young people beyond just the exact things that they're doing. But really bringing that social aspect to that networking aspect and a lot of that social capital in us to play as well is something that really, really transformed my thinking of OST, not just as one element of one part of the day, as it so often gets relegated to, but more so a space and a place where students can really go to be heard and engage beyond just the classroom. And get really, really great quality learning and engage with their democracy and engage with their communities, beyond just the school setting, which so often students are relegated to.

Syeda Tabassum ([21:57](#)):

I think since doing our research, I've actually worked at an OST, I've been one of the youth leaders at an OST. So, I was in charge of the experience these young people would have had. And so, I think a lot of what we talked about in the research, I took that with me in my role as being the mentor and especially after doing this research, I understand building community is so important; and maybe I didn't realize that as a participant, but I definitely realize it now being a youth leader or a mentor.

Spandana Pavuluri ([22:32](#)):

There's something so valuable in an OST where you feel genuinely cared for and where your achievements are really celebrated rather than people being, it being more competitive. And so, when

you're in a space where people just unapologetically cheer you on and care for you, that's very, very important. So counteracting competitiveness is also a really important aspect of an OST.

Connor Flick ([23:30](#)):

And I think to really pull that all together kind of nicely, it's that culture of collaboration and empathy that we really see shining through and that we so desperately need in our OST programs. And some of them are very effective in incorporating it and introducing it, it into our lives, but there's always more that can be done. So as we wrap here, I have one last question for all of you. What advice do you have for funders, policymakers, and other decision-makers to improve dignity and belonging in OST programs for all young people? Syeda, let's start with you.

Syeda Tabassum ([24:03](#)):

Maybe we should just send them this podcast. No, I think what's really important is just having these conversations. I think that's one of the conclusions we made about how do, where do we go from here after doing all that research is actively having these conversations and including the youth as well. You know, we're just one group of young people, but I bet there's a whole bunch of other perspectives on this. And so yeah, we just really need to see what the youth want and kind of listen to them. I think that's one big thing.

Daniela DiGiacomo ([24:34](#)):

Thanks, Syeda. I think when I think about what we can do to ensure dignity and belonging in these programs, I think about for those who are thinking about starting an after-school or an out-of-school-time program or for those who run them or those who want to fund them, thinking about what is the purpose, why are you starting this, and what is your goal? I think if we think often about education and youth as a project of development, we should ask ourselves what is the purpose of that development.

I'll always think about, there's a good developmental economist called Amartya Sen, and he argues that

the project of development should be freedom or the ability to live a life that one has reason to value.

And I think thinking about encouraging and supporting young people to be, to pursue the lives that they

have reason to value not the life that you value is an important way to think about how we can promote

spaces that foster dignity and belonging. And again, thinking about how can we can decenter our own

sort of egos and ways of being and recognize the richness that comes with the plurality of perspectives

and experiences is a really important thing to consider.

Sam Mejias ([25:47](#)):

Completely agree with what both of you have said. But I think it's simple, too. The advice I would have

for funders and policymakers and decision-makers is, center those concepts when you are constructing

programs; OST programs center dignity, center belonging, that should be the outcome you're desiring.

That should be the outcome you're striving for. And I think, you know, we see evidence of this starting

to happen, but I think it's around taking those sort of core principles that are around equity and saying,

"OK, well this is actually what the entire intention is behind what we're trying to do." And, you know,

that starts the process of building dignity and belonging from the top, which I think is incredibly

important.

Spandana Pavuluri ([26:25](#)):

Yes, I absolutely loved everything that was said so far. You know, some other things that funders or just

even OST leaders can do. For funders specifically, it would be about funding program outreach, because

that's often what makes it really difficult to access those marginalized communities because it takes

other mediums, it takes the extra effort, and sometimes that does involve money. And so funding

program outreach and then providing resources to eliminate those frequent barriers and then

promoting flexible time commitment options is super important. And then for OST leaders, I would try

and find workshops on antiracism standards, connecting with new young people, setting the foundation for high-quality OST. And I really, really do hope that community and accessibility and dignity and everything that Daniela, Sam, and Syeda said are on there because it's very, very important. But so many students want to talk about this and, you know, all our responses are a testament to that.

Connor Flick (27:30):

You know, I think you pretty much nailed everything that the research shows. I think you spoke to it wonderfully and this last question I think really highlighted some of the more actual things that a lot of spaces can do and what the next steps are for a lot of people that are running OST spaces now. And so I want to thank you all for your time. I want to thank you all for this conversation. This has been wonderful. I also want to highlight once again that if you want to learn more, and if you want to read further, you can read the findings in a brief on Wallace's website at www.wallacefoundation.org. The brief is called "Youth Perspectives on Designing Equitable Out-of-School-Time Programs. Thank you all once again for having this conversation with me. This has been wonderful. I'm Connor Flick and I'll see you around.